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In Praise of Horse-Race Coverage

If campaigns are contests, then why not obsess on who's winning?

By Jack Shafer

No presidential campaign would be complete without self-flagellation by the press about its overreliance on "horse race" coverage. *Politico* honchos John F. Harris and Jim VandeHei donned the hair shirts earlier this month to compose an apology on behalf of the political press corps for pushing so many horse-race inspired "bogus narratives" on readers.

Among the bogus narratives cited by VandeHarris were "McCain is dead" from last summer; Huckabee has no chance in Iowa; Obama is a dud—no, Obama is the bee's knees!—and the Clinton machine will die in New Hampshire.

While I appreciate the pair's candor, self-reflection, and regret, you can no more divorce "horseracism" (to pinch Brian Montopoli's coinage) from campaign coverage than you can divorce horseracism from the coverage of horse races. Why else would they call political contests "races"? Or their leading contestants "front-runners"?

Consider the fullness of the metaphor: A bunch of perfectly groomed and tended politicians gather at the starting gate. They all have track records and somebody has placed a bet on them. When the gun sounds, they run like Seabiscuit, frothing and jostling. Some pull up lame before the race concludes. The event, which seems to go on forever, can be a blowout or end in a photo finish. The winner takes a victory bow as the losers regroup for the next heat or depart for the glue factory.

During an actual horse race, nobody wants to hear the announcer drone on about the ponies' dietary regimes. They want to know who's winning, who's gaining, who's in the thick of it, and who can be written off. Are the front-runners burning themselves out and letting a back marker take the prize? That which cannot be compressed into an announcer's play-by-play ends up in the learned pages of the *Daily Racing Form*. But for immediacy, nothing rivals a great horse-race take.

Horse-race coverage isn't the devil spawn of the television age. Scholar C. Anthony Broh dates horse-race coverage of campaigns back to 1888, when the *Boston Journal* reported that a "dark horse" was unlikely to appear in a campaign. While noting horseracisms' obvious deficiencies, he catalogs its many pluses. Horse-race journalism increases voter interest in campaigns, something you can't say for the average newspaper's delineation of a position paper. "The horse-race image encourages reporters to emphasize competition rather than to forecast results," Broh writes, arguing against the common view that reporters are keen to anoint a winner as soon as possible. Every political reporter I know yearns to cover a deadlocked presidential convention.

Critics of horseracism complain that it isolates on poll results and reports from campaign rallies to the exclusion of discussions of political "substance." But that's hardly ever the case. *Mother Jones'* Jonathan Stein has been cataloging some of the best of the substance coverage, recently citing pieces about Clinton's voting record vs. Obama's and a comparison of the Democrats' domestic policy. He's also refuted Matt Taibbi's *Rolling Stone* piece that claims the campaign press corps has bogged itself down in trivialities. But even if the press corps had abandoned substance, no voter is more than a mouse click away from detailed policy papers and unfiltered campaign speeches by the candidates. If you're not an informed political consumer this year, you have nobody to blame but yourself.

A political campaign is more than a traveling debate society. Beyond the issues, voters need to know why a candidate is (or isn't) performing well in the polls, is (or isn't) raising money, is (or isn't) drawing crowds of supporters, or is (or isn't) keeping his cool. Candidates win or lose for a reason, reasons that have to do with issue papers but also with how they carry themselves and present their positions. Candidates appreciate this fact, which is why they commission private polls so they can construct their own horse-race results and act on them.

Of course, reporters should never forget that their subjective impressions of the voters' subjective impressions are ... subjective, and that reporters are as fallible as anybody. But these subjective impressions also convey essential information that helps voters decide which candidate will govern best. For instance, in this campaign the difference among the Obama, Clinton, and Edwards health-care plans are negligible compared with the changes likely to be mandated by a Congress controlled by the Democratic Party. To make an intelligent decision about which one of these three to vote for, a citizen needs horse-race data.

Finally, if not for horseracism, reporters would have no concrete way to cover the ultimate "substance" of the Obama campaign, which is more about personality and establishing a transcendental social movement than pushing a unique set of policy prescriptions.

It's one thing to watch a horse run the track by himself, but there's no substitute for watching him pound the turf with his equals. Only great horses can go the distance. Only great horses stage comebacks. And the only time a race really makes sense is when it's over. As for the view that political reporters love to cover campaigns as a horse race because it's so easy, you try it sometime. And then get back to me.

If Edwards was a horse, I'd be looking at him as a long shot. Place your bets at slate.pressbox@gmail.com. (E-mail may be quoted by name in "The Fray," *Slate's* readers' forum, in a future article, or elsewhere unless the writer stipulates otherwise. Permanent disclosure: *Slate* is owned by the Washington Post Co.)